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CIA Has Begun Triple Assault On Information

In a triple assault on the public's right to know, the CIA is trying to shut off channels of information to the electorate, is seeking criminal penalties against reporters whose stories might identify CIA operatives and is spreading "disinformation" to news agencies.

The most disturbing is the disinformation campaign. This poisons the well from which Americans draw the facts they need to govern themselves. The wise Thomas Jefferson sought to lay this issue to rest two centuries ago when he argued that the people's right to know is more important than the officials' right to govern.

Now along comes William J. Casey, the CIA director, with the argument that the government has the right to mislead the public by planting phony stories in the press.

His purpose, ostensibly, is patriotic. He wants to build public support for the political, economic and military measures that the Reagan administration believes are necessary to counter the worldwide conspiracies of the Soviet Union.

Legal experts have warned that the CIA is forbidden by law from

conducting operations within the United States, and that disinformation aimed at the American public, therefore, would be illegal. But Casey has found a way that he apparently thinks the CIA can get around the law. The disinformation will be planted with foreign news bureaus whose stories are picked routinely up by U.S. newspapers.

Thus the phony stories may be concocted by CIA dissemblers in McLean, Va., but will reach the American audience circuitously through foreign sources.

Trusted CIA sources have told my associate Ron McRae that the foreign press, in the words of one insider, "is already being manipulated directly."

Consider the campaigns to discredit Libya's radical ruler, Muammar Qaddafi, for example. There should be no need to portray him as being any more vile than he is. He has committed outrages that should be sufficiently repugnant to arouse American public opinion against him. I have called Qaddafi the world's most irresponsible ruler, and have backed up this opinion with facts that need no embellishment.

But under Casey, the CIA is busily creating rumors connecting Qaddafi to the slave trade in Mauritania, the only nation that still auctions people on the block.

The CIA is also spreading stories that Qaddafi is manipulating Libyan accounts in international banks and

otherwise mismanaging the Libyan peoples' petrodollars.

The agency has even considered arranging the disappearance of a moderate Moslem leader after a visit to Libya. This could revive the out rage against Qaddafi in the Moslem world that followed the disappearance of a holy man, Mousa Sadr. He never returned from Libya after a set-to with the dictator.

What Casey doesn't understand is that truth is the most effective method of persuading people and influencing events. If the U.S. government could re-establish its credibility, its word could become a powerful weapon for combating communism.

Footnote: Casey has done his utmost to obstruct the flow of CIA information to the public. He has also sought criminal penalties against reporters who divulge the identity of CIA agents. These steps are necessary, he has contended, to protect the CIA's secret operations.

The truth is that the CIA's ineptness, not newspaper stories, has jeopardized secret activities and exposed its operatives.

The CIA has complained loudly that its station chief in Athens, Robert Welch, was gunned down because his identity was revealed in anti-CIA publications. But the CIA station chief had occupied the same house in Athens for two decades, and sightseeing guides used to point it out to tourists.